

24 April 1965

I. F. Stone Comments on Scenario:

1. The proposal is a phony: a shallow attempt to disguise the failure of the bombing policy at the current level of attacks and to justify an expanded pattern of attacks, probably against population/industrial targets and targets that involve greater risks of involving the world in general war.

2. The phoniness derives from several aspects of the "offer" (or, ultimatum):

- a) the short time limit;
- b) the ambitiousness of the demands;
- c) the nature of the US offer.

3. Is there any sign that the VC are just on the verge of abandoning their control of 25% of the population and 50-75% of the countryside, because of the US attacks on North Vietnam or for any other reason? Is there any sign that Hanoi is on the verge of asking the VC to do so? If so, the President hasn't told us about it. Yet that is what the President's demand amounts to: that the VC should cease all "attacks" -- including resistance to GVN incursions into territory administered by the VC -- and should, in effect, stop their insurrection against the Saigon regime. In return for this, what? The US will stop its illegal, aggressive, immoral and deadly dangerous attacks upon North Vietnam.

4. Obviously, the President could not seriously expect -- unless he knows much more than he has told us -- that the VC would give up, in two weeks, on this basis. Nor could he have drawn the conclusion from recent statements by the DRV that they were prepared to cease their support to the VC movement under this level of pressure. Nor could he believe that Hanoi could turn off the VC to this extent even if it wanted to -- especially in two weeks.

5. The conclusion is inescapable that this is a flashy play -- a piece of "crisis management" for the world audience -- intended to demonstrate Johnson's statesmanlike magnanimity and reasonableness, to fail, and to be followed, "regretfully, but unavoidably" with air strikes against North Vietnam that are less justifiable and put greater pressure on the Chinese and the Soviets to enter the war than anything we have seen so far.

6. Still, Johnson's ploy may turn out for the best, if the people of the world, and especially of the United States, will put these two weeks to good use. For once, he has deprived himself of the ability to present the Congress, the public and the world with a fait accompli. Whether to end that "pause" is a decision that should not be his alone to make. Let us tell him -- through Congress, through letters, through the press -- in God's name to write off this ill-conceived, bloody gamesmanship as a failure and begin to deal with the realities of the situation.

7. Those realities include deep and rather reasonable feeling by the North Vietnamese that they do not choose to sit down to discuss the future of SEA while they are being bombed by the Americans. Second, the VC or the DRV should not be expected to begin negotiations by giving up their trump card: VC control of territory and population. If the US wants a VC standdown, they can probably get it by offering a ceasefire in SVN. A genuine offer would be to stop bombing and start talking.